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ABSTRACT

An informal study attempted to determine if audio-taped comments on student papers in freshman composition were as efficient and effective as those actually written on student papers. An instructor began the experiment in the third week of the semester--after he had already returned one batch of papers with written comments on them. Students supplied the audio cassette and numbered the sentences of their paper for easy reference; the instructor used a voice-activated machine to avoid the hassle of pushing "record" and "stop." Assessment surveys showed that 96 of the 110 students involved in the study preferred the cassette to the pen. Excerpts from written student comments show enthusiastic endorsement of the cassette grading method. In comparing his written comments to his recorded one, the instructor notes that he is more likely to "talk" to the student on tape as opposed to "grading" or "correcting" with a pen. Second, complimentary comments are more prevalent on tape. Third, the instructor paid more attention to global comments on the paper and less attention to grammar penalties. Fourth, the cassette alerted him to counter-productive tendencies inherent in written comments; cassette grading has tamed his predatory impulse with the pen. Finally, the instructor found cassette comments more efficient time-wise. The student assessment of audio evaluation instrument is attached. (TB)

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Fergus Falls Community College **Paul Carney**

ED 381 801

Is it the Teacher or is it Memorex?:

Responding to Student Essays Using Audio Cassettes

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Fergus Falls Community College **Paul Carney**

Is it the Teacher or is it Memorex?: Responding to Student Essays Using Audio Cassettes

A. Background

I conducted this classroom research project in five sections of freshman composition during the 1994-95 academic year. A total of 115 students participated in this research project. Throughout the course students studied various literary genres and conveyed their insights through a series of analytical compositions.

This project was inspired by curiosity and efficiency. Having experienced the toil and tedium of evaluating essays while clutching my pen, I wondered if tape recorded responses would streamline the process as well as improve student writing.

Teaching Goal:
My goal was to examine the advantages and disadvantages of using audio cassettes as an alternative method for responding to student essays. While the primary focus was on writing assessment and student receptivity to instructional feedback, I hoped to gain insight into my evaluation tendencies and patterns.

Teaching Question:
To what extent does audio response to compositions enhance student receptivity to evaluation and thus improve writing skills?

B. Teaching Strategy

After the third week of the quarter, I implemented the use of audio cassettes to record and convey my responses to student essays. With the student's paper in front of me and the cassette recorder beside me, I verbally shared my evaluative comments and suggestions. The recorded cassettes were then returned to the student along with the unmarked essay.

C. Classroom Assessment Strategy

At mid-quarter and at quarter's end, students completed self-analysis surveys which assessed their satisfaction level with audio responses to their writing (see attached CAT).

In order to compare the effectiveness of the audio response method to the traditional written feedback, I responded to the first batch of essays in writing. Subsequent essays were evaluated using audio cassettes to convey my comments and suggestions. In addition to assessing the clarity of sound, the assessment survey asked students to consider the contributions of audio response to improving their writing. Ultimately, I was curious about the process by which students revisited their work with the unmarked paper and the auditory comments beside them.

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The Process of Using Audio Cassettes: Some Procedural Issues

Prior to submitting their essays, students were asked to place numbers before each sentence so that I could more efficiently and more clearly identify the location of my focal attention (Note: the numbers should appear directly before each sentence, not each line). I also asked students to highlight each number for quicker identification of sentences. The highlighted numbers also served as visual indicators of the writer's sentence pattern habits

Upon submitting their numerically highlighted essays, students also provided a standard size audio cassette with their name and the course number on the label. I then stored the cassettes in a cassette case.

To increase the efficiency of the actual response process, I used a small voice-activated cassette recorder to register my comments. The voice activation feature freed me from having to fumble with stop/record buttons while reading and "talking through" the essay. The initial sound of my voice triggered the recording device, and when I reached a pause period to gather my thoughts, the recorder deactivated. After sharing my auditory comments, questions, and suggestions with the writer, I ejected the cassette and returned it to the storage case. Once these support procedures (numbered sentences, properly labeled cassettes, storage case, voice-activated recorder) are followed and become routine, the process flows quite smoothly.

D. Assessment Data

Data collected from three quarters of assessment suggest that students prefer and positively respond to audio responses to their writing. A compilation of year-long classroom assessment surveys revealed that most students (96/115) found the audio evaluation method **very helpful** in aiding them to **recognize** the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. Further, most students (87/115) indicated the method was **very helpful** in providing guidance to **improving** their writing (see attached CAT for exact numbers in the categorical responses).

Given the choice between audio or written evaluation of their work, 96 of 115 students preferred the cassette to the pen. In fact, on assignment due dates, a number of forgetful students who insisted on receiving audio feedback drove home between classes to retrieve their cassettes.

Finally, students were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of the audio response method. The following comments represent noteworthy responses from the students.

Representative Student Attitudes Toward Audio Response

It worked well in that hearing the instructor's voice and his comments about the paper made it more personal than reading an evaluation. I think it's a good idea to verbalize the comments.

I liked the audio evaluation because I could understand what you were saying. It was more interesting. With the audio you have to look at your paper again because the comments are on tape instead of on paper.

When I can hear my mistakes, like when you read my errors, I can clearly detect my mistakes. When a teacher writes down the mistake beside it, I sometimes have a hard time finding it. But when you read it out loud it was easy for me to detect it.

With written evaluations there is less explanation of problems in the writing. Verbal explanations are much easier to understand than circled words and lines all over the paper.

I found the audio evaluation to be very clear and in depth. It did more than tell me what was wrong. Instead it told me why it was wrong and gave me suggestions. I also found it to be much more personal.

Using the audio evaluation, the instructor is able to elaborate more when pointing out errors and suggesting ways to make the writing better.

I think it was easier to notice the strengths and weaknesses in the audio evaluation. I got a better explanation of what I was doing wrong and you gave examples and told me how to improve it.

You have to look over your paper again. The message comes across clearly. To me, when teachers write on my papers, they seem to be yelling through their writing.

It worked well just to sit with paper, pen, and cassette listening and revising at the same time, as if in the tutorial session with an instructor.

I did like the ability to be able to follow along on the paper as I listened to the cassette. It helped to make things clearer.

The audio works better for me because this way I had to write on my own paper about what was wrong by listening to the audio. I understand things better when I actually write it.

It was easier because it seemed like you are right there with me correcting the paper.

E. Results

1. Feedback to Students

After compiling the data from the assessment survey, I shared the findings with the students. Perhaps the most significant side effect of the audio response method was that it preserved the visual integrity of the student's paper. According to classroom consensus, written comments, typically coded in abbreviated form, can be confusing, discouraging, even humiliating. Many students expressed the defeatism they felt upon receiving essays which appear to be "vandalized" by the instructor's grade-justifying graffiti. The cassette fostered a "kinder, gentler" demeanor as I was able to express more meaningfully complete insights and ideas without defacing the paper.

The passage below represents an introductory paragraph which I evaluated with pen in hand. Beneath the passage is a partial transcript from the audio response which addresses the same paragraph. Note the explanatory limitations of the abbreviations as well as the curt tone which they establish. Notice also the shift from written **scrutiny** to spoken **suggestion**. ("d" signifies diction)

Excerpt of Written Response to Paragraph

In Stephen Dunn's poem "Hard Work," the speaker reveals the effects that a job releases into the human soul. The speaker, after accepting a job in a bottling plant, soon realizes what he may become is he continues a nobody in the work force and his home. Unable to allow this, he quits his job and retreats back to the life that he enjoys.

Transcript of Audio Response to Paragraph:

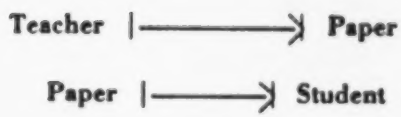
"Cathy, your introduction has a sharp focus. In Sentence 1, you might want to modify 'effects' for clarity...In Sentence 2, I like how you insert 'after accepting the job in the bottling plant' between the subject and the verb. That's sophisticated writing. After 'continues' you may want to omit the semi-colon and use a comma or a dash. Nice dependent clause pattern in Sentence 3...check for clutter words.

2. Changes in Strategy

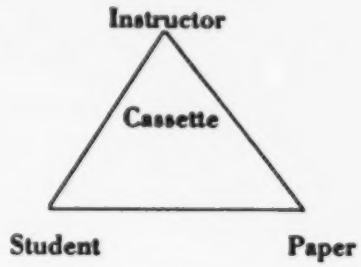
As I voiced my comments into the cassette recorder, I tracked my awareness of several significant changes in my approach to responding to student writing.

First, and perhaps most important, I found myself **talking to the student** rather than grading the paper. Frequently, I visualized the student's face as I recorded my responses. The cassette, unlike the written response, formed a triangular exchange between the teacher, the paper, and the student, thus creating an inclusive three-dimensional "spirit" during the process. This graphic comparison illustrates the contrast in the interaction among student, essay, and instructor.

Written Response Dynamic



Audio Response Dynamic



Second, I noticed that I was offering more comments and suggestions than criticisms and corrections. With the mighty pen stripped from my hand, I became more of a helpful reader and less of an eagle-eye editor. Without a pen pinpointing my attention, my peripheral vision of the paper expanded, liberating me to see the whole of the composition.

Third, global issues suddenly emerged as the focus of my attention, which diminished the score-keeping interference of grammar penalties. Perhaps for the first time in my teaching career, I was both willing and able to discuss - really discuss - with the writer the complex nature of "awk" as well as the slippery cognitive intricacies associated with logic, originality, argument, and imagination. Though non-interactive, the cassette provided me a dynamic similar to a conference with the student. I credit the comment-filled cassette for the apparent improvement in revisions and in subsequent essays.

Further, the cassette method alerted me to counter-productive tendencies inherent in my written evaluations of student compositions. Unexpectedly though refreshingly, the use of audio cassettes has had a positive influence on how I conduct my written evaluations, for it has tamed the predatory impulse in my pen and has caused me to consider carefully the written messages I send.

Finally, I calculated the cassette comments to be more efficient than the written reactions. I particularly appreciated the cassette's efficiency during my summary comments and suggestions. Perhaps the greatest time-saving contributions occurred when I noticed the absence of clarification questions following the return of papers. Because the cassette offered the students greater tutorial depth and clarity, it virtually eliminated post-class hallway conferences.

While I celebrate and will continue to use audio cassettes as an alternative to the pen, there are several conditional drawbacks. First, one must find and secure the appropriate space and solitude, preferably a place insulated from noise and interruptions. An island would be ideal. Because the method limits portability, one can no longer respond to essays during eternal committee meetings or while waiting in the doctor's office. Second, the initial gathering, storage, and distribution of the cassettes can be cumbersome; however, these hurdles can be cleared, or at least lowered, by following the procedures mentioned in Section C. Finally, though I have been known to chomp on a pretzel or nibble on a Twizzler while recording my comments, the cassette approach interferes with that familiar duet between eating and evaluating.

As the students listened attentively to the comments on the cassettes, I must listen to the data in this study. Quite literally, students want to **hear** what I have to say about their writing.

Spring 1995 Name:_____

Student Assessment of Audio Evaluation

1. The clarity and volume of the audio evaluation was: (check one)

   106 Satisfactory
   9 Unsatisfactory

2. Rate the degree of difficulty you experienced in reviewing your papers while listening to my comments and suggestions:

   98 No difficulty
   15 Some difficulty
   2 Great difficulty

3. If you experienced **some** or **great difficulty**, please explain the nature of the problem.
   Volume muffled; incomplete comments when recorder is not activated

4. To what extent do you feel the audio evaluation assisted you in **recognizing** your writing strengths and weaknesses.

   91 Very helpful
   18 Somewhat helpful
   6 Not helpful

5. To what extent do you feel the audio evaluation assisted you in **improving** your writing?

   87 Very helpful
   19 Somewhat helpful
   9 Not helpful

6. Do you prefer audio or written evaluations of your essays?

   96 Audio 11 Written 8 No particular preference

7. Was there anything in particular about the audio evaluation that made it **easier** for you to detect your writing strengths and weaknesses? In other words, why did it **work well** for you? What did you **like** about it? How did it differ from the written evaluations with which you're familiar? (See responses in Section D of text)

   _____

   _____

8. How did you bring the cassette and the paper together? Under what circumstances did you review your paper while listening to the cassette?

   _____

   _____